

STATEHOUSE DEMOCRACY

Public opinion and policy in the American states

ROBERT S. ERIKSON

University of Houston

GERALD C. WRIGHT

Indiana University

JOHN P. McIVER

University of Colorado



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1 RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1993

First published 1993

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Erikson, Robert S.

Statehouse democracy : public opinion and policy in the American
states / Robert S. Erikson, Gerald C. Wright, John P. McIver.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-41349-4. — ISBN 0-521-42405-4 (pbk.)

1. Public opinion — United States — States. 2. State governments —
United States. I. Wright, Gerald C. II. McIver, John P.

III. Title.

HN90.P8E76 1993

303.3'8 — dc20 93-7076

CIP

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-521-41349 4 hardback

ISBN 0-521-42405 4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1. Democratic states?	1
2. Measuring state partisanship and ideology	12
3. Accounting for state differences in opinion	47
4. Public opinion and policy in the American states	73
5. State parties and state opinion	96
6. Legislative elections and state policy	120
7. Political culture and policy representation	150
8. Partisanship, ideology, and state elections	177
9. State opinion over time	212
10. Conclusions: Democracy in the American states	244
<i>References</i>	254
<i>Index</i>	265

Democratic states?

Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.

V. O. Key (1961, 7)

Popular control of public policy is a central tenet of democratic theory. Indeed, we often gauge the quality of democratic government by the responsiveness of public policymakers to the preferences of the mass public as well as by formal opportunities for, and the practice of, mass participation in political life. The potential mechanisms of democratic popular control can be stated briefly. In elections, citizens have the opportunity to choose from leaders who offer differing futures for government action. Once elected, political leaders have incentives to be responsive to public preferences. Elected politicians who offer policies that prove unpopular or unpleasant in their consequences can be replaced at the next election by other politicians who offer something different.

Of course, this picture describes only the democratic ideal. A cynic would describe the electoral process quite differently: Election campaigns sell candidates in a manner that allows little intrusion by serious issues. Once in office, winning candidates often ignore whatever issue positions they had espoused. Voters, who seem to expect little from their politicians, pay little attention anyway.

The actual performance of any electoral democracy probably falls between these extremes. Acknowledging the factors that impede effective democratic representation, we can ask to what degree does public opinion manage to influence government decisions? This is an empirical question, often noted as the central question of public opinion research (Key, 1961; Converse, 1975; Burstein, 1981; Kinder, 1983; Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, 1991).

Ultimately, virtually all public opinion research bears on the question of popular control. The most directly related studies are those that examine the statistical relationship between public opinion and public policies on

Statehouse democracy

specific issues, a task that is never easy (Weissberg, 1976; Monroe, 1979; Page and Shapiro, 1992). On balance, the somewhat ambiguous evidence suggests that the government does “what the people want in those instances where the public cares enough about an issue to make its wishes known” (Burstein, 1981, 295).

Almost all U.S. studies of the influence of public opinion focus on the national level. However, the ideal place to investigate the relationship between public opinion and public policy would seem to be the American states. With fifty separate state publics and fifty sets of state policies, the states provide an ideal laboratory for comparative research. Yet there has been little research on the opinion–policy linkage at the state level. The decisive inhibiting factor has been the lack of good survey-based measures of state-level public opinion.

This book attempts to fill this research gap. We develop new measures of state-level opinion. They are the liberal–conservative ideological and the partisan identifications of the state electorates. These new measures are based on an aggregation of 13 years’ worth of CBS News/*New York Times* (CBS/NYT) national opinion surveys. The resulting data set has rather large state samples, often exceeding the size of most national survey samples. It provides the measures we need to explore the relationships between the ideological leanings of state publics and patterns of policies in the states.

THEORY AND EXPECTATIONS

We approach our exploration of the opinion–policy connection in the states guided by some conflicting expectations. One starting point is the elementary “democratic theory” of the sort developed by the economist Anthony Downs (1957) in his influential *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Downs’s model in turn draws on the work of an earlier economist, Harold Hotelling (1929).¹ In its basic form, the Downs model assumes that voter preferences can be arrayed on a single ideological continuum, from the political left to the political right, with citizens voting for the candidate closest to their own position on this ideological spectrum. The basic Downs model also assumes competition between two political parties or candidates for majority support. These assumptions drive the outcome: Parties and candidates converge toward the middle of the spectrum, with the winner being the candidate closest to the median voter. Since the winning program converges toward voter preference at the midpoint of the ideological continuum, the policy result renders an accurate representation of the composite position of the electorate as a whole.

1. Political scientists generally refer to the Downs model; economists often call it the Hotelling model.

Democratic states?

How accurate is this Downsian interpretation of elections? Economists and political scientists tend to divide on this question. Economists who write of politics and elections generally accept the Downs (or Hotelling) model free of empirical complications, as if nonideological (or nonissue) variables did not matter. At the extreme, the economists' view of the political world reduces to figuring out what the median voter wants, as if (in the words of Plotnick and Winters, 1985, 460) "the political process proceeds straightforwardly to translate the median voter's preferences into public policy."

Political scientists tend to be more skeptical about the degree of democratic representation. To political scientists, the Downs model often seems politically naive, particularly in its assumption of ideologically interested voters. Voting studies show, for example, that vote choices are motivated by variables like party identification and aspects of candidate attractiveness that often override any considerations of the candidates' issue positions or ideological proximity to the voter.²

Political scientists are also sensitive to the strong role of political parties, particularly the parties' policy-motivated activists (Schattschneider, 1942; Morehouse, 1981). Very real differences between the preferences of Republican and Democratic activists (including candidates) preclude candidate positions from converging in straightforward fashion to the position of the median voter. Accounting for nonconverging candidates is a challenge to analytic modelers (e.g., Wittman, 1990).

Despite problems of complexity, the elegance of the Downs model has influenced political science greatly as a paradigm for electoral research. Electoral researchers know that while voters do not always vote for the candidate closest to their views, voters are influenced by candidate ideology among many other factors. Electoral researchers also know that while political parties and candidates certainly care about winning, they also care about the policies they will enact if victorious. A Downsian process may push government policies toward the center but also into competition with many other political forces.³

2. Economists' and political scientists' differing visions of democracy in practice can best be seen in their varying paradigms of legislative representation. Following the influential research of Miller and Stokes (1963; see also Stokes and Miller, 1966), the general expectation within political science is that representative behavior only minimally reflects constituency preferences. Political scientists are inclined to resist evidence of strong congressional representation as implausible, given the public's lax attention. Economists have a different starting point: Assuming the median voter is electorally decisive, why do legislators so often engage in the risky behavior of "shirking," or seemingly voting against constituency preferences? For a sampling of recent contributions from economics, see Pelzman (1984), Nelson and Silberberg (1987), and Lott and Davis (1992).

3. When ideological voting (or "issue voting") is probabilistic rather than determinis-

Statehouse democracy

Thus, the correctness of the Downs model is a matter of degree. For candidates, appealing to the political center is important but not always crucial. One can imagine an electoral system inhabited by voters so inattentive (or uninformed) regarding the ideological positions of candidates that elected politicians enact policies totally unburdened by the constraint of public opinion. One could also imagine the opposite, a system in which the electorate actually dictates the ideological tone of government policy making. From the standpoint of democratic theory, this latter outcome may be the more desirable. But we must ask, How much is required of the electorate and of elected officials for public control of the direction of government policy to become reality?

Judging solely from what we now know about the political readiness of the typical voter, there might appear little hope for much policy representation in any political arena, let alone the U.S. states. Thanks to the classic *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960) and subsequent research on electoral behavior, we have convincing evidence that individual voters tend to be rather ignorant and indifferent about matters of ideology and public policy. We should keep in mind, however, that collective outcomes, including election results, can be driven by a relatively small number of actors, not just those who are "typical." Economists know this lesson well. When, for example, they forecast a response in the national economy to a change in the prime interest rate, they naturally do not assume that the typical U.S. consumer is closely monitoring the activities of the Federal Reserve Board. But they do assume that some small number of economic actors will watch and serve as the engine for general economic change. We believe the political analogy here is quite plausible. While we would not expect the typical U.S. voter to respond to the politicians' everyday political posturing or specific roll call votes, some important individuals do pay attention, with consequences that can extend to the ballot box. Moreover, just as the Federal Reserve Board will anticipate the economic response to their actions, so too will politicians gauge and anticipate the electoral response to their possible actions.

The question is, Where on the continuum of possibilities lies the truth about democratic accountability? We know a lot about individual voters and some things about politicians, and not all of it is favorable for representative democracy. As U.S. government is currently practiced, are policies guided by public preferences? A discerning reader of contemporary political science might think not. This negative conclusion would seem to

tic, the exact median voter result does not necessarily hold. For instance, if issue proximity is represented as the difference in the squared differences between the voter and each of two candidates (the common assumption), then the equilibrium result is the mean voter preference. See Enelow and Hinich (1984) and Erikson and Romero (1990).

Democratic states?

be particularly compelling when the discussion centers not on matters of central concern to the U.S. public, but rather on the arcane world of state politics. Sheltered from the public limelight and constrained by limited resources on the one hand and federal requirements on the other, state-level policy making would seem to offer little leeway for innovation in response to public demands. Understandably, tracing the policy impact of public opinion has received low priority in state politics research.

STATES AS LABORATORIES

The role of public opinion has been largely neglected in the study of state politics. One way of seeing this is to note the disjuncture in the importance of public opinion in policy studies at the national versus the state levels. In national studies, public opinion (and its expression through the electoral process) is frequently of central concern in explaining the processes of policy development and change over time. Public opinion has a major explanatory role in historical studies of realignment (Burnham, 1970; Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale, 1980), national policy change (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Stimson, 1991; Page and Shapiro, 1992), and roll calls and policy making in Congress (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Schwarz, Fenmore, and Volgy, 1980; Sinclair, 1982; Wright, 1986; Brady, 1988) and of course, voting in presidential elections particularly through the very extensive use of National Elections Studies data. The pervasive attention to the connections between public preferences and the actions of government on the part of scholars of national politics is not in the least surprising. Whether we try to make sense of the observed government behavior or try to assess the democratic quality of policy making in the United States, we fully expect analysts to incorporate the public's preferences about policy and judgments of politicians in their explanations of politics.

In sharp contrast to this familiar attention to public opinion at the national level, state policy studies have proceeded with only passing attention to public opinion. A contributory reason surely is a prevailing scholarly viewpoint that because state politics is beyond the attention of most citizens most of the time, there is little reason to expect state policies to reflect public preferences. In fact, more reasons are usually offered for why public opinion is irrelevant than for why it is influential. Jack M. Treadway's review of the state policy literature dismisses the contribution of public opinion this way:

There is every reason to assume a lack of congruence between policy outputs and political opinion. First, given the lack of public information and interest among the public, there will be many issues for which no public opinion exists. Second, even if opinions exist they must be conveyed to policymakers. Since few citizens regularly contact their elected officials, it is quite possible that opinions will not be

Statehouse democracy

transmitted to the policymakers. . . . Third, even if policymakers hear from the public they may choose to ignore what they hear. Finally, because the public is generally uninformed about the policy attitudes and activities of their elected leaders, they may not be aware of how accurately their opinions are being reflected by policymakers. A lack of congruence between public opinion and public policy could be perpetuated by public ignorance that such a situation exists. It seems likely that would be more of a problem at the state level. (Treadway, 1985, 47)

Treadway's articulation, though unusually explicit, is consistent with the generally implicit assumptions of much of the state policy literature. In practice, explanations of patterns of policy in the states have incorporated an impressive range of variables, but only sporadically have public preferences been among them. From reading the state policy literature, one might conclude that policies generate mysteriously from a variety of state-level variables ranging from state affluence to the professionalism of the legislature. The idea that policy choices might be driven by electoral politics – so common in the national-level literature – is seldom articulated in literature on state policy.

This neglect of the potential opinion–policy connection in the state politics literature represents a missed opportunity. At the national level, effects of public opinion are often difficult to ascertain because the rate of opinion change on most issues is slow and often entangled with the flow of events and policy change itself (Page and Shapiro, 1992). The states, by contrast, offer real-world laboratories for the comparative study of all sorts of political processes (Jewell, 1982). Since the individual states encompass groups of citizens of widely varying political attitudes and values, scholars can use this variation to assess the responsiveness of state policies to citizen policy preferences. Additionally, the states offer an opportunity for the analysis of the impact of political structures on the opinion–policy representational process that cannot be done at the national level, where but a single set of unvarying institutions prohibits effective assessment of their effects on representation.

Comparative analysis of the U.S. states, therefore, offers great potential for research on public opinion–public policy linkages. However, this potential has not been exploited. The reasons, we have suggested, appear to be twofold: a lack of adequate data on the preferences of state electorates and problems of conceptualization concerning the policy processes in state studies.

Measuring state opinion

The central reason for ignoring public opinion in the states is a practical problem of inadequate data on state opinion. The explanation for this gap

Democratic states?

in our data collection was identified by Richard Hofferbert in his summary of the state policy field:

A glance at the literature makes clear the difficulty of studying all the intricacies of individual citizens' political participation. If such "micro" data are to be the basis of comparative analysis at the aggregate (for example state) level, the problems of data collection alone (not to mention conceptual difficulties) are nearly astronomical. . . . To make equally accurate estimates about the residents of all fifty states, one would have to interview fifty times as many people as are included in the national sample. Neither the resources nor the motivation to do a sample survey of 75,000 people has yet risen to the task. (1972, 22-23)

Still, some scholars have seen the relationship between public opinion and state policy as sufficiently important to risk assessing the role of public opinion indirectly. Not surprisingly, surrogate measures of state opinion have their drawbacks; each rests on tenuous assumptions regarding the linkage between the intended attitudes and the measurable variables. We consider some examples.

One common substitute for direct measurement is the "simulation" of state opinion from the demographic characteristics of the state residents (Pool, Abelson, and Popkin, 1965; Weber and Shaffer, 1972; Weber et al., 1972). For instance, Weber and his associates (Weber and Shaffer, 1972; Weber et al., 1972) "simulated" state opinion on a variety of issues. Using a two-step process, they first used national opinion surveys to establish the opinions that were typical for groups of citizens defined by their combinations of social and economic characteristics. The simulation then consists of constructing a state opinion index that represents an average of the groups' opinions weighted by the sizes of the groups in the states' populations.

Weber et al. report strong relationships between simulated opinion and policy on two of the five issues they examined. Unfortunately the simulation technique suffers from two important problems. One problem is that "simulation" taps only the demographic sources of opinion and not those due to the state's political culture or the state's particular history. Second, these demographic sources of opinion may reflect the causal impact of the socioeconomic indicators themselves rather than the impact of public opinion (Seidman, 1975).

We can also mention other efforts. In a simpler procedure, Nice (1983) inferred state ideological preferences from the state two-party vote in the ideological Nixon-McGovern presidential election of 1972. Nice found strong and significant relationships between the McGovern vote and several indicators of state policy, most of which survived controls for standard demographic variables. Although Nice produced some of the strongest evidence of policy responding to public opinion, doubters may

Statehouse democracy

question whether the predictive power of presidential voting is due to ideology or something else.⁴

Finally, the dilemma of how to measure state opinion is made evident from Plotnick and Winters's (1985) analysis of state welfare policy. Needing measures of "voter preferences for redistribution," Plotnick and Winters chose per capita United Way contributions and charitable deductions on federal income tax returns as a percentage of adjusted gross income. These measures performed miserably in an otherwise satisfactory causal model explaining state welfare guarantees. As Plotnick and Winters explain, "Although this first effort at measuring voter sentiments at the state level and identifying its effects on policy is disappointing, it demonstrates the need for better measurement of this theoretically important variable" (1985, 469).

Armed only with weak, indirect, or dubious measures of state opinion, analysts who dare estimate the opinion-policy connection cannot easily be sure of their results. A poorer than expected correlation can be due to poor measurement. A strong correlation, on the other hand, can be challenged on the grounds that the surrogate measure of public opinion actually measures something else.

State socioeconomic variables

In lieu of the generally unmeasurable preferences of state electorates, state policy researchers have focused on variables that they could actually measure. The central preoccupation of the state policy literature has been an ongoing contest between "political" and "socioeconomic" variables as competing explanations of state policies. Socioeconomic (or "environmental") variables, by almost all accounts, are the winners of this contest. Such variables as state wealth, urbanism, and education appear to be the best predictors of state policy. These predictors work at the expense of certain political variables, such as voter participation, party competition, and the quality of legislative apportionment. With socioeconomic variables controlled, these political variables do not predict policy liberalism in the manner once hypothesized (Dawson and Robinson, 1963; Dye, 1966; Hofferbert, 1966, 1974).

Yet considerable uncertainty exists regarding what the socioeconomic indicators actually measure. An early and influential view is Dye's "economic development" interpretation (1966, 1979). Dye posited that the socioeconomic measures reflect the stages of economic development through which states evolve. As states become more developed, they also

4. The 1972 presidential vote has often been used as a surrogate for the ideological preferences of congressional districts. See, e.g., Schwarz and Fenmore (1977) and Erikson and Wright (1980).

Democratic states?

adapt a predictable set of policies. But while the state's economic base and social needs matter, state politics does not.

Dye's analysis was widely interpreted to mean that the workings of the democratic political process are largely irrelevant to understanding state policy. But this verdict now seems premature. For instance, it may have been naive to assume that if "political" variables like party competition, voter turnout, and proper apportionment enhance popular control, they would always do so by stimulating liberal or pro-"have-not" policies. A better assumption would have been that these variables enhance the democratic process by facilitating the translation of the majority viewpoint into law, whether it is liberal or conservative (Godwin and Shepard, 1976; Uslaner, 1978; Plotnick and Winters, 1985).

More important for our purposes is the question of whether the predictive power of the socioeconomic variables reflects something more than the deterministic force of economic development. On this, the early literature expressed a certain ambivalence.⁵ Some scholars have expressed the view that socioeconomic variables reflect the input of political "demands" (Jacob and Lipsky, 1968; Godwin and Shepard, 1976; Sigelman and Smith, 1980; Hayes and Stonecash, 1981). The difference between seeing socioeconomic variables as reflecting economic development and seeing them reflecting political demands may seem little more than a matter of semantics. But if we go one step further and substitute "public opinion" for political "demands," we can begin to see the importance of this distinction. We may then speculate that the predictive power of socioeconomic variables is due to the correlation of these variables with the unobserved variable of public opinion, which is actually a major determinant of state policy. Dye (1990, chap. 2) offers an interesting exposition of this new interpretation.

We have, then, two distinct views of what socioeconomic variables stand for. Seen as nonpolitical indicators of economic development, socioeconomic variables cause policy through some unspecified, but nonpolitical process. Elections, legislators, interest groups, and citizens play out their roles in a sideshow devoid of policy consequences. The implications

5. Consider a typical example from the literature of the 1960s and 1970s. From conducting a factor analysis on state socioeconomic characteristics, Hofferbert (1968) identified the two dominant dimensions as "industrialization" and "cultural enrichment." Labeling a factor as "cultural enrichment" would seem to imply that it taps citizens' values and preferences rather than economic determinism. However, labeling a socioeconomic composite as "opinion" or "values" requires a strong act of faith. It is difficult to give an unambiguous attitudinal interpretation to factors that are made up of indicators of wealth, ethnicity, and education. This uncertainty about what is measured is reflected in Hofferbert's subsequent analysis in which the cultural enrichment label is converted to an equally apt but perhaps safer choice of "affluence" (Sharkansky and Hofferbert, 1969; Hofferbert, 1974).

Statehouse democracy

for meaningful democratic governance could hardly be more perverse. But when the same socioeconomic indicators are seen as measures of public opinion, the findings that socioeconomic variables "cause" policy yields a positive message about democracy in the U.S. states. High correlations between environmental measures and policy show that public demand is usually satisfied; state politics "works." In fact, in this view, low correlations between socioeconomic measures and policy would be evidence that state political institutions fail to translate public preferences into policy.

In summary, the role of state public opinion has not fared well in the comparative study of state policy. Much of the literature has emphasized the importance of socioeconomic variables. These variables are easily quantifiable and predictably potent, but their theoretical meaning continues to be unclear. Variables that are not readily measurable, like state public opinion, have received lesser recognition. Studies that do give state public opinion full attention are handicapped by severe problems of measurement.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Our thesis is that public opinion is of major importance for the determination of state policy. We will show that in terms of ideological direction, state policies tend to reflect the ideological sentiment of the state electorates. Moreover, we will show that party elites and two-party electoral politics, as these interact in the American states, are crucial elements in the linkage process. The progression of our argument can be seen in the following summary of the chapters to come.

Chapter 2 introduces our state opinion data. From pooling CBS News/*New York Times* surveys from 1976 to 1988, we obtain measures of state ideological identification and state partisan identification. Chapter 2 presents this data and describes the reliability and stability of the new measures of state opinion. Chapter 3 asks the question of where these differences in ideology and partisanship among the states come from. While some of the state-to-state differences in ideology and partisanship are attributable to differences in demography, we also find that state of residence has a large impact on citizens' liberalism-conservatism and partisanship even after state demographics are taken into proper account. States are active and meaningful political communities whose electorates have distinctive preferences; the states are not just collections of atomistic individuals whose opinions automatically flow from their personal socioeconomic characteristics.

Chapter 4 introduces our composite measure of state policy liberalism. This chapter shows that the ideological direction of state policy largely follows from the state citizens' mean ideological preference. Policy and

Democratic states?

opinion, in other words, are highly correlated. As part of this demonstration, Chapter 4 shows that the well-known correlations between socioeconomic variables and policy liberalism (previously discussed) actually reflect the effect of opinion on policy. To the extent that socioeconomic variables predict policy, they do so because they correlate with state opinion.

Chapter 5 shows how the ideological preferences of Democratic and Republican elites reflect the pull of their own “extreme” ideologies in one direction and the push of the electorate’s ideological moderation in the other direction.

Chapter 6 presents our general model of the policy process in the states. It shows how state electorates control the ideological tone of state policy by rewarding the state parties closest to their own ideological views, and how party control does have policy effects, albeit in ways that are more complex than is commonly thought.

Chapter 7 examines the theory of state political culture developed by political scientist Daniel Elazar. We find rather strong evidence that Elazar’s typology of state cultures distinguishes among states in terms of their representational processes.

Chapter 8 renews the focus on state elections by using Election Day exit poll data to assess the different ways states vote for president, U.S. senator, and governor. Here we find important interoffice differences in some patterns of electoral behavior. Our analysis includes factors from both the micro- and macrolevels to demonstrate an important relationship between state partisanship and state ideology that is completely missed at either level alone.

Chapter 9 examines the state representation process – from the 1930s to the present – by utilizing Gallup poll questions to create aggregate measures of state ideology and state partisanship.

Chapter 10 summarizes our findings in accounting for how apathetic and generally poorly informed state electorates are able to achieve remarkably high levels of popular control over a broad range of state policies. The process is anything but automatic; representation requires electoral competition and motivated party activists to achieve statehouse democracy.